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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000896

SIPDIS

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PARIS FOR RWALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR UNSC SA SY LE

SUBJECT: SAUDI KING WILL TRAVEL TO DAMASCUS WHEN HARIRI IS "READY"

REF: BEIRUT 746

Classified By: CHARGE AMBASSADOR RICHARD ERDMAN,  
REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D).

¶11. (U) This is an action request. See paragraph 10.

SUMMARY

¶12. (C) Saudi Information Minister Khoja confirmed to Charge that King Abdullah's planned July 6 visit to Damascus had been postponed to allow Saad Hariri the time he needed to form an inclusive government that did not give the opposition a blocking third. Achieving this would require Syrian acquiescence, Khoja argued, but was Lebanon's best chance for stability and independence. The Saudis were conditioning improved relations with Syria on Syrian good behavior in Lebanon and the King would visit Damascus when Hariri advised he was "ready." Khoja counseled patience, resisting the influence of Lebanese actors such as Geagea, and "allowing the Lebanese to create their own solution." Khoja emphasized the need to consider a wider regional context in which stability and Syrian cooperation were paramount. To that end, Khoja suggested a Hariri/King Abdullah visit to Damascus after the new Lebanese government was agreed but before it was actually formed. End summary.

KING'S DAMASCUS TRIP POSTPONED

¶13. (C) Charge called on Minister of Culture and Information (and former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon) Abdulaziz Khoja in Jeddah on July 6 to reinforce USG concerns regarding a planned Saudi-Syrian-Lebanese summit in Damascus. Pressing Hariri to visit Syria before the Lebanese cabinet was formed, Charge confirmed, could be seen as inviting the Syrians back into Lebanon, and undoing all the gains Lebanon and March 14 had made toward real independence. Khoja advised that the Saudis agreed completely and consequently, the King's planned July 7 visit had been postponed.

SYRIA'S UNDENIABLE ROLE

¶14. (C) Charge welcomed this decision, making clear we continued to believe that bringing Hariri to Damascus prior

to government formation would be a serious mistake. Khoja agreed this was not a good idea, emphasizing their intention was to support Hariri and facilitate formation of a new government that preserved Lebanese independence and sovereignty. Khoja argued that Hariri had three choices for the incoming cabinet. He could form a cabinet that excluded the opposition; he could agree to a cabinet that gave the opposition a blocking third minority; or he could form a cabinet that included all parties but did not give any faction veto power. Lebanon's best option, in the Saudi view, was the latter choice: an all-inclusive government that did not/not give the opposition a blocking third minority. This goal could not be achieved, however, in the face of Syrian opposition. Therefore the Saudis were attempting to influence Syrian thinking by making clear to Damascus that any improvement in Saudi-Syrian relations would be linked to stability (AKA Syrian good behavior) in Lebanon.

¶ 15. (C) The Syrians professed to share the goal of Lebanese stability, Khoja explained, but "had many requirements." The Saudi strategy for dealing with these demands was to engage. Khoja said he did not "refuse out of hand" the initial Syrian proposals to allow time to consult with the King and Lebanese parties. Khoja wanted to give the Syrians room to propose an alternative idea when the Saudis ultimately rejected the Syrian idea of Hariri and leaders of the other Lebanese factions traveling to Damascus for negotiations in the presence of the King and Asad. The Syrians now wanted Hariri to come to Damascus before a new government was announced. According to Khoja, the Syrians explained that if Saad came before government formation, Damascus could be helpful to

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Lebanon. But if he came after government formation, they would not be helpful.

¶ 16. (C) Charge commented that this sounded like blackmail, and Syria would likely just pocket a visit if it occurred before cabinet formation and then do whatever it pleased to maximize its influence and role. Khoja stressed that the Kingdom had no illusions whatsoever about Syria and agreed this tactic was tantamount to blackmail. The stark reality, however, was that Syria could prevent the formation of a government in Lebanon if it wanted to, and we thus needed to figure out how to deal with this reality.

THE VISIT WHEN HARIRI IS READY

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¶ 17. (C) Charge asked for clarification: had King Abdullah definitely decided not to visit Damascus before the new Lebanese government was announced? Khoja answered that the King would not travel until an agreement had been reached. "When Saad tells us they're ready, then we'll go." Khoja then floated a scenario in which Hariri and the King would go to Damascus AFTER agreement on a government had been reached, but BEFORE it had actually been formed. Charge, while not rejecting this idea, responded that a visit after government formation would be a much cleaner, more straightforward approach that would avoid the risk of sending the wrong signal and undermining Hariri. Khoja indicated that this scenario offered the possibility of gaining Syrian acquiescence/cooperation while limiting its ability to dictate government formation. He added that the Saudis wouldn't consider a trip until they were sure that this mission (i.e., the kind of government we want) was accomplished. "We're not in a hurry to go."

WHAT IF HARIRI CAN'T FORM A GOVERNMENT?

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¶ 18. (C) Nevertheless, the Saudis were concerned that if Hariri went to Damascus only after government formation, Asad might not receive him. Charge rejoined if that was the case, it said something about Syria's reliability and readiness to be

helpful. Syria's desire for closer cooperation with the U.S., Charge suggested, should give it an incentive to view the Lebanon issue in a broader context. We shouldn't play Syria's game. Khoja agreed, saying "this is a fact." However, there was "another fact" to be considered: what if Hariri were unable to form a government? Who would help him?

What would the U.S. be able to do in such a situation? In Lebanon, there were two alternatives: either "the fighting continued," or "we start over (with a new Hariri government the Syrians agree to), because we have many other problems in the region."

KEEP AN OPEN MIND AND  
RESIST PAROCHIAL INTERESTS

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¶9. (C) Khoja suggested that perhaps the best approach would be to let the Lebanese "create their own solution." Hariri should be given time to see what he could achieve in the next week or two. "Let him create his own future as a leader." In the meantime, Khoja urged U.S. patience. Please "think with us," he urged. "We shouldn't give orders to our allies, and we should resist the influence of Geagea and others. The problem in Lebanon was that there were 17 countries and 17 leaders. "Geagea thinks he's the U.S. President. Aoun thinks he's emperor of the world, and Nasrallah thinks he can rule a country ten times bigger!" The focus now needed to be on the interests of Lebanon, with a view to its links to broader regional stability. Khoja emphasized that he wanted to keep in touch as the Lebanese situation evolved and to brainstorm with Charge &with an open mind8 on how to support the government formation process and secure Syrian cooperation without inviting negative Syrian interference. In this regard, Khoja said he was calling Saad every 2-3 days &just to say hello8, see how things were going, and provide encouragement.

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COMMENT/ACTION REQUEST

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¶10. (C) Khoja's account of the latest developments largely tracks with what Embassy Beirut reported in reftel. King Abdallah would be the first to agree with Hariri's assessment that "Bashar is a liar." The Saudis have a huge stake in Lebanon and in preserving the gains they have worked hard to achieve in the last year. They are unlikely to succumb to Syrian blackmail. However, they are convinced that preserving Lebanese independence requires some realpolitik to mitigate Syria's trouble-making potential. At Khoja's request, Charge is planning to see Khoja in Jeddah on or about July 1, following Treasury Secretary Geithner's visit, to review developments in Lebanon. It would be helpful to have Washington's views on the idea Khoja floated about a possible Damascus visit after agreement on government formation has been reached but before the government is actually formed.

ERDMAN